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Encana calls on EPA to abandon Pavillion test wells

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The company in the center of a groundwater contamination debate thinks the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should abandon its monitoring wells near Pavillion and refocus its investigation.

Officials representing Encana Oil and Gas said on a conference call Thursday that the federal agency's investigation into whether natural gas production has contaminated groundwater in the Pavillion gas field is flawed and needs a clean start.

The call was scheduled two days before the one-year anniversary of an EPA report tentatively linking hydraulic fracturing to groundwater contamination east of Pavillion. During the call, company officials were critical of EPA methods used in the drilling, collection and sampling processes used by the agency to test local groundwater.

"The EPA should withdraw its draft report," said David Stewart, environmental, health and safety lead for Encana's Wyoming operations. "The data is inaccurate and their conclusion is not supported by the data."

The agency didn't respond directly to the company's requests Thursday, but issued a statement detailing its history in the Pavillion field. The agency added that it is accepting comments on the Pavillion investigation until Jan. 15 and that investigation data will be peer-reviewed.

The EPA drilled two monitoring wells in the Pavillion gas field in summer 2010 in response to complaints about local drinking water. The agency hoped to ascertain whether oil and gas development surrounding several rural homes east of Pavillion was the cause of contamination.

The agency released a draft report in December 2011 tentatively linking the industry's use of hydraulic fracturing, also known as fracking, to water contamination. Encana has criticized EPA's placement and depth of the wells, the methodology employed in drilling and the evidence cited by the EPA in its report.

The agency agreed to re-test the area this year after criticism from the state and Encana. The U.S. Geological Survey conducted the second test and released test data this fall, but without interpretation. Both the agency and Encana have since claimed that the newly gathered data back their opposing claims.

Encana said the focus of the investigation is one of the company's larger problems with what the EPA's done in the Pavillion area. "This has been a misguided response," Stewart said.

Stewart said the agency drilled monitoring wells that were far too deep rather than following up on tests of domestic water wells, which Encana believes indicate the real problem in the gas field.

"Most wells sampled exceeded palatability criteria," he said. "Yet the EPA decided not to respond to or investigate or understand why those exceedances were occurring."

Stewart also questioned several "assumptions," which he said the EPA must have made while drafting its report. He said the agency's report indicates it used false information about water flow direction, a sign of failure to understand the geology of the field. According to Stewart, the agency drilled a monitoring well into one geologic formation which the company targeted.

"Hydrocarbons have always been there," he said. "That's why we drilled there in the first place."

Stewart said the company hopes the agency will abandon its deep monitoring wells in the area and shift its attention back to domestic wells.

"Domestic well samples need to be looked at more from a bacterial standpoint, what's contributing to taste, odor and palatability problems," he said. "That was not done."

Data from the EPA and USGS tests in the area -- which is several miles east of the town of Pavillion -- is expected to be peer-reviewed sometime shortly after the public comment period closes in January.